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What do we achieve from learning in collaboration?

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Abstract

When groups of learners help each other, collaborative learning occurs. Collaboration is a philosophy of interaction and personal lifestyle where people are accountable for their actions, including learning and respect the abilities and contributions of their peers. The advances in technology and changes in the organizational infrastructure put an increased emphasis on teamwork. Group members have to think creatively, assess problems, and make decisions as a team. In all situations where people come together in groups, it suggests a way of dealing with people that respects and highlights individual group members' abilities and contributions. Application of learning in collaboration, can lead to many advantages. This article seeks to describe the potential advantages of learning in collaboration.

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1. Introduction

Panitz (1996) noted that collaboration is a philosophy of interaction and personal lifestyle where individuals are responsible for their actions including learning, respecting members' abilities and their contributions. There is a sharing of authority and acceptance of responsibility among group members for the groups' actions. The underlying premise of collaborative learning (CL) is based upon consensus building through cooperation by group members, in contrast to competition in which individuals best other group members. CL practitioners apply this philosophy in the classroom, at committee meetings, with community groups, within their families and generally as a way of living with and dealing with other people. Many advantages have been ascribed as outcomes of learning in collaboration, called CL. It is just after understanding the benefits of this mode of learning, that we can apply it to our benefits. Although, before making any judgments about the CL values, we must understand and define the term exactly (Annett, 1997).

Today, collaborative thinking and working together on critical issues are necessary (Austin, 2000; Welch, 1998), causing to shift from individual attempts to team work and from autonomy to community (Leonard, & Leonard, 2001).

Laals (2012) cited Gokhale (1995) that noted: The concept of CL, groups of learners who are going toward a common learning goal, has been widely researched and advocated. The term refers to an instruction method in

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which learners work together in small groups to attain a goal. They are responsible for their as well as other's learning, in a group. So, the success of one helps others to be successful. Linda Brown and Vicky Lara (2011) cite Johnson & Johnson (2009) that state: individuals have 3 ways of action in relation to the actions of others, as one's actions:

- E Increasing the success of others;
- E Preventing the success of others;
- E Having no effect on the success of others.

Or we can say:

- E One works with others toward a common goal;
- E One works against others (competes) toward a goal;
- E One works individually toward a goal unrelated to the goal of others.

This paper has a look on the benefits following learning in collaboration. The main goal is to understand what we achieve of learning in collaboration in comparison with learning individually.

2. Material and method

This article reviews the potential advantages of CL. Key issues were identified through review of literature on CL, and through review of literature on the potential benefits that follow learning in collaboration. This paper is in quest of finding the main possible advantages that follow learning in groups while sorting them in key groups. This article is highly accessible and designed to appeal to a wide audience of academics.

3. Results

Despite the term of CL has been widely used in many different disciplines and fields, there is no consensus upon its definition (Jenni, & Mauriel, 2004). Despite the lack of consensus on what CL is, there are some underlying features that will be identified. Laals cited Bruffee (1996) who claims: Abercrombie M.L.J., a teacher physician, found that his medical students who worked together in groups, more quickly made a medical diagnosis and gained a better medical conclusion than those working alone. CL is an educational approach to teaching and learning, involving groups to work together to solve a problem, complete a task, or create a product. In a CL setting, the learners listen to different perspectives, and are required to articulate and defend their ideas. The learners begin to create their own frameworks and not rely solely on an expert's or a text's framework. In a CL environment, learners talk with each other, present and defend their ideas, exchange a wide variety of beliefs and question other conceptual frameworks (Srinivas, 2011).

Collaboration has become a 21st century trend. CL is clearly a shift from the typical teacher-centered or lecture-centered setting to a collaborative state in which other processes that are based in students' discussion and active work with the course material, other than entirely lecturing/ listening/note-taking process, take place. Teachers who apply CL approaches tend to think of themselves as designers of intellectual experiences for students-as coaches or midwives of a more emergent learning process, not just as transmitters of knowledge to students (Smith, & MacGregor, 1992). It has been accepted that higher levels of thought follow learning in teams and also the achieved information maintains longer than when the learners work individually (Johnson, & Johnson, 1986). Samuel Totten (1991) says that: The shared learning gives learners the opportunity of participating in discussion and taking responsibility for their learning, to become critical thinkers. Proponents of CL claim that the active exchange of ideas within small groups, increases interest among learners and also encourages them to think critically (Gokhale, 1995).

According to Laal et al. (2012) who cited Johnsons' survey (2009), further achievements might be resulted from learning in collaboration rather than learning individually, as follows:

- E Higher achievement and greater productivity;

- E More caring, supportive, and committed relationships, and;
- E Greater psychological health, social competence and self-esteem.

CL is not just learning or working together. Five essential elements should be met to call a learning program a collaborative one, Johnson and his colleagues (1990) claimed. They are:

- E Positive interdependence,
- E Considerable interaction,
- E Individual accountability and personal responsibility,
- E Social skills,
- E Group self-evaluating.

CL bears many fruits, as Johnsons (1989) and Pantiz (1999) list over 50 of these achievements and categorize them into four major groups of:

- E Social,
- E Psychological,
- E Academic,
- E Assessment advantages.

Many advantages, including higher achievement and greater productivity, could be the results of learning in groups compared with competitive and individualistic efforts. Further description of the achievements is discussed in the following section.

4. Discussion

The chief achievement of CL is to develop social interaction skills. As Cohns (1991) claimed, in CL setting, the group members are asked to recognize the behaviours that help them working together and to identify their contributions to the group's success or failure. Therefore, they realize the need for healthy, positive helping interactions and are well-educated for working in groups. CL helps both the majority and the minority of individuals; to learn working together (Slavin, 1980). In a CL environment, learners are trained in social skills needed to work collaboratively (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1984). As students are actively engaged to explore problems and interact with each other on a regular basis in a direction, they will be able to identify their differences and resolve the social conflicts (Johnson, & Johnson, 1985). CL encourages developing positive societal responses to problems and also preparing a supportive environment for members to manage conflict resolution (Johnson, Johnson, 1990). Laal & Ghodsi (2012) cited Yager and his colleagues (1985) that claimed CL helps students to increase oral communication skills.

Students, who teach each other, know that they are presenting the concepts and orally communicate to their partners (Neer, 1987). CL prepares a non-violence, fear-free milieu, and increases honor, unity, friendliness and quality. The process of CL is as essential as the elements and the goal (Kessler, & McCleod, 1985). They noted that learning in groups promotes positive societal responses, reduces violence and helps to eliminate fear and blame.

Psychological achievements are the second category of CL advantages. CL increases self-esteem in students (Johnson, Johnson, 1989). All members benefit from a CL setting. CL leads to a higher performance level of members by making a supportive environment in which members help each other (Kagan, 1986). This in turn increases the self-esteem (Webb, 1982). All participants are more involved to perform and complete a task in CL, than traditional competitive systems in which participants are left behind. Members are more satisfied with the process of CL for; they are actively engaged in the learning process and their abilities and inclusion are also valued. This is especially true for those with a history of failure (Turnure, & Zigler, 1964). Nelson-Legall (1992, p.64) notes: students in mathematics classes spent most of their time individually in the classes or seatwork activities. But in small CL groups, students in need of help were more help-seeking from their peers by asking

questions and requesting explanations, they have the opportunity to discuss, ask, explain, and monitor one another; this in turn enhances their learning. Students are reluctant to seek help; even they might be in need of help and have trouble with the course content. In CL, students benefit from group interactions; they learn the material by seeing their peers and detecting the strategies used by others, they compare their learning strategies and work habits and make the required changes, in this way students help each other. Kessler, et al. (1985) and Johnsons (1989) say that CL significantly reduces anxiety. In a CL setting, when a question is presented to the group, the answer represents the work of whole group. CL increases the positive attitude toward the teachers and vice versa toward students (Panitz, 1999).

The third set of advantages is the academic achievements. CL causes higher level of thoughts. In a CL environment students are actively involved in learning process, instead of passively listening to the teacher and taking notes (Webb, 1982). In CL, students listen to their peers, discuss about the problem, get immediate feedbacks and solve it together (Johnson, 1971). As a result, their skills of problem solving and formulating the ideas are raised. Discussion and debate are obviously more in a CL setting, than when the students are contributed to a teacher led discussion. This helps to clarify the ideas and promotes critical thinking. In CL, practice and building learning skills are more enhanced and less tedious. CL develops metacognition in students. Metacognition means cognition of students and analysis the way they learn. Students monitor each other, detect errors and learn how to correct the mistakes (O'Donnell, & Dansereau, 1992; Pressels, 1992). CL makes the students to take full responsibility for their learning (Panitz, 1999). CL improves the classes by higher achievements and greater class attendance of students. It also promotes innovation in teaching and the techniques used (Slavin, 1980).

The last group of benefits includes the assessment achievements. In a CL setting, many assessments would take place (Rosenshine, & Stevens, 1986), as: observation of the group, self-assessment of the group and individual assessment of the members in a group (Panitz, & Panitz, 1997; Cross, & Angelo, 1998).

5. Conclusion

CL involves groups of learners working together toward a common goal. Learning in groups has higher achievements and productivity. This paper outlined the potential advantages and put them in four categories of: social, psychological, academic and assessment benefits. In a brief review, CL develops social interactions, increases positive social behaviors such as honor, unity, friendliness and reduces violence. From the psychological aspect, CL increases self-esteem and more involves the members to take part and responsibility for the outcomes. CL has many academic advantages as it improves the skills of problem-solving and increases high level of thinking. CL techniques use many alternate assessments which include both group and individual assessments.

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